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AUTHOR Conway, Kathryn M.
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ABSTRACT

An examination of three articles written in the year 1900-1901 by the young rhetoric instructor Gertrude Buck reveals her influence on the development of modern rhetorical theory. Her view that discourse is a social act, her attempts to free discourse from formal rhetoric and the expectations of teachers, and her insistence that rhetoric should follow intelligent practice in composition set her apart from her contemporaries. Her contributions to the foundations of modern rhetorical theory as well as the work of her women colleagues have been neglected for decades because of gender bias and discrimination. (A brief biography is included.) (RS)

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Abstract

The author examines Gertrude Buck's three publications in the year 1900 -1901, focusing on Buck's keen interest in the development of rhetorical theory, and showing how the articles document a pivotal point in the thought of a young rhetorician. The articles are titled: "The Present Status of Rhetorical Theory," "What Does Rhetoric Mean?" and, "Recent Tendencies in the Teaching of English Composition." The author concludes that Buck's writings are a rich resource for women, as well as for all who wish to explore the roots of contemporary rhetorical theory.

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Gertrude Buck, Rhetorician

If I ask you to name a rhetorician
Whose life spanned the late 19th and early twentieth century,
Who held a B.S., an M.S. and a Ph.D. in rhetoric,
Who published 8 books, several of which became standard rhetoric texts,
Who authored more than 13 articles for professional journals,
Who was an active member of the Modern Language Association,
the New England Association of Teachers of English, and
the National Council of Teachers of English,
Who taught rhetoric to college students for 25 years,
and, finally, who was a poet, playwright, and the founder of a theatre.....
Who comes to mind?
At first you might guess "one of those famous men from Harvard", like Adams Sherman
Hill, LeBaron Briggs, or George Pierce Baker.
Alternatively, you might wonder if I meant Fred Newton Scott, of the
University of Michigan.
But considering the title of this presentation you'll know that I want you to recognize
Gertrude Buck, Professor of English at Vassar College, as the rhetorician who claims all of
the preceeding accomplishments.

As I describe just one year of Buck's career in detail, please keep in mind another puzzle:
If Buck was known and respected as an innovative rhetorician 70 years ago, why do we
not study her work more commonly today?

Between 1890 and 1898 Gertrude Buck earned three academic degrees in rhetoric from the University of Michigan, where she studied and collaborated with Fred Newton Scott. Her other major fields of study were psychology and philosophy. In 1897 Vassar College hired Buck to revamp its undergraduate program in rhetoric, and to establish a graduate minor in rhetoric. Within the next two years Buck not only established five courses in rhetoric and composition, but she also published two theoretical books and two textbooks. By 1901 she was able to direct her energy toward her graduate students, for whom she designed advanced courses in rhetorical theory, argumentation, and criticism. Today I wish to focus on Buck's keen interest in the development of rhetorical theory, using as evidence three articles that she published in the year from 1900 to 1901. They document a pivotal point in the thought of a young rhetorician. The articles also reveal Buck's self-confidence as a scholar, for in them she predicts where her own work in rhetorical theory will fit into the overall history of the discipline.

The articles are titled:

"The Present Status of Rhetorical Theory,"

"What Does Rhetoric Mean?" and,

"Recent Tendencies in the Teaching of English Composition."

While Buck did not present a fully developed theory of rhetoric in these articles, she did convey the themes that set her work apart from her predecessors. Most importantly, she viewed discourse as a social, organic act: "essentially not static nor artificial, but living and moving, a growth rather than the product of manufacture." In "What does rhetoric mean?" She defined rhetoric as the science or theory of the process of communication by language. Thus the domain of rhetoric for Buck had a distinctly social character, rather than an individuated character. In "The Present Status of Rhetorical Theory," published in a Modern Language Association journal, Buck explores how "two opposing conceptions of

the nature of discourse bequeathed to us from classic times still struggle for dominance in our modern Rhetorical theory." Here Buck places the sophists in opposition to Plato, claiming that the rhetoric of the sophists is anti-social. Because a sophistic rhetor seeks to persuade the audience to accept a certain belief, whether or not the rhetor even holds that belief to be true, Buck asserts that the ensuing discourse is solely "for the sake of the speaker." The rhetor does consider the audience carefully, but only to more skillfully manipulate it. The greatest challenge for the sophistic rhetor is to persuade an antagonistic audience. Buck states, "the speaker must by finesse assail the hearer's interests for the sake of his own." Thus sophistic rhetoric is antisocial, because it's ultimate goal is to place the individual speaker in a dominant position over the audience. Especially abhorrent to Buck is this notion of domination: an unequal exchange where "the speaker wins and the hearer loses continually." She continues, "Discourse is purely predatory -- a primitive act of aggression of the strong upon the weak. The art of rhetoric is the art of war."

Having boldly damned sophistic rhetoric, Buck turns more favorably to Plato. She discusses the importance of Truth in discourse, upholding truth as a value which both the rhetor and the audience seek equally. As an act of discourse begins, the speaker holds a slight advantage over the hearer, because the speaker already holds a vision of truth which she seeks to share with another person. When she successfully communicates this vision to the hearer, "the original inequality is removed, the interests of both speaker and hearer are furthered, and equilibrium is at this point restored to the social organism."

Buck recognizes sophistic rhetoric in the texts of her day: the manuals that showed a rhetor how to create certain effects in the audience, with heavy-handed persuasive tactics. Yet, Buck stops short of claiming that Platonic rhetoric could possibly exist in 1900. With humor she notes two reasons for its absence: First, "we are not now-a-days on such joyfully intimate terms with the absolute truth as was Plato." Second, she acknowledges that the relative and temporary truths gleaned through personal experience and observation are more acceptable to modern people than the absolute Truths of Plato.

To highlight the ever-increasing importance of individual experience, Buck reviews the changes that occurred in the teaching of rhetoric in the 19th century. Treatises and declamations on classical or on abstract subjects gave way to writing based on student's day-to-day life. Thus arose the daily themes of rhetoric classes taught in the late 19th century.

Overall, Buck believed that "the rising, modern rhetorical theory" would agree with the doctrine of Plato in that it would concern real communication between the speaker and the hearer, to the equal advantage of both. In 1900 Buck predicted that "it cannot be long before we shall recognize a modern theory of discourse as large in its outlines as Plato's and far better defined in its details: a theory which shall complete the social justification which rhetoric has so long been working out for itself."

Buck clearly envisioned herself as a pioneer of this future rhetoric. Indeed, the turn of the century itself provided a stimulus for looking into the past and for looking into the future. In 1901, Buck stated that "Rhetorical theory affords a field almost unworked by modern tools or methods. It presents innumerable problems demanding solution on the basis of recently formulated psychological and aesthetic principles." Buck realized that the new science of rhetoric would be developed by the next generation: her graduate students. Buck herself did not engage in the type of scientific studies that eventually became the domain of speech communication.

In the article, "Recent Tendencies in the Teaching of English Composition," Buck traces methods of teaching rhetoric in the classroom from Whately to her own time. She fully describes her attempts to "free" discourse from the constraints of formal, mechanical rhetoric and from the artificial expectations imposed by teachers. By encouraging students to engage in "normal writing acts," Buck believed that they would become better communicators. For instance, she encouraged students to write letters on topics that mattered to them personally. Rather than force her students to write or argue about a two thousand year old fragment of a speech, Buck sparked her students desire to communicate

by suggesting such a provocative topic as "Women should receive the same salaries as men for the same work."

Also crucial to Buck's rhetorical theory was her insistence that rhetorical inquiry should follow "intelligent practice in composition." This is a major departure from the rhetorical theories of the past, which prescribed rules for discourse. For rhetoric to become a science, it must have a body of "natural" or unaltered material to study. In this regard, Buck did indeed describe a future path of inquiry for composition research. (ie protocol analyses, cases studies of writers.)

From just a brief look at one year in Buck's long career, we see a rhetorician who was completely immersed in her discipline, who reflected carefully upon the past, and who looked forward enthusiastically to a "new science of rhetoric." In subsequent work, Buck consciously laid a foundation for future rhetoricians, and posed questions that would not be addressed for many years.

What she did not foresee, and would have been dismayed to know, was that her work and the work of her women colleagues would be neglected for decades.

Let's return to the question that I posed earlier,

Why do we not study Buck's work today?

The authors who do bring Buck to our attention attribute her eclipse to the overriding demand for "superficial correctness" during the early half of this century. However, I argue that the cause for neglect is not so simple nor so academic. I side with Buck herself in seeking a social explanation for this puzzle. Gender bias and discrimination figure in the disappearance of Gertrude Buck and other women rhetoricians. Buck died in 1922, a time when women in the United States began to experience a strong backlash against the advances that they had made in science and academia. Buck's work, like that of many women, was buried along with her.

A balanced history of the development of rhetoric cannot be written without studying Buck's work. Furthermore, her work is of value because it carries the seeds of what is emerging today as a feminist theory of discourse. Buck's condemnation of rhetoric as an act of domination, an act of war, fits well with contemporary studies in the area of language and gender. She favored Plato, whose works, theoretically, at least, admit women into the realm of discourse. In keeping with the "scientific" restraints of her discipline and the conservative nature of professional publications, Buck did not include overt feminist statements in the three articles to which I referred today. Yet her later works, especially her books on argument, do include distinctly feminist topics. Buck was active in the struggle for women's suffrage, sharing this campaign with her colleagues and students. Undoubtedly she regarded this effort as an act of discourse that would restore equilibrium to the social organism.

We are fortunate to have Gertrude Buck's writings -- they are a rich resource for women, as well as for all who wish to explore the roots of contemporary rhetorical theory.

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